

The Relationship Between Supervisor Personality, Supervisors' Perceived Stress and Workplace Bullying

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ABSTRACT. This study investigated the relationship between supervisor personality and subordinate reports of exposure to bullying and harassment at work. Three research questions were examined: (a) Is there a direct relationship between supervisor personality and reports of workplace bullying? (b) Is there an interaction between supervisor personality and supervisors' perceived stress as predictors of workplace bullying? (c) Will subordinates who experience bullying at their workplace rate their supervisor's personality more negatively (negative halo effect)? The sample consisted of 207 supervisors and employees within 70 Norwegian restaurants. Supervisors low on conscientiousness, high on neuroticism and portraying high levels of exposure to stress were the subject of significantly more reports from subordinates of exposure to workplace bullying. An interaction between agreeableness and stress was found showing that agreeableness is related to bullying under low levels of stress. In addition, subordinates who perceived their supervisor as being low on agreeableness and high on introversion reported significantly more workplace bullying, supporting a negative halo effect hypothesis.

KEY WORDS: leadership, bullying, harassment, personality, romance of leadership

Introduction

Workplace bullying is widespread in contemporary working life. A meta-analysis of prevalence rates showed that 10–20% of working populations are exposed, depending on the estimation method and the population sampled (Nielsen et al., 2010). A large body of research has also documented significant negative psychological and job-related effects for the targets of bullying, as well as for bystanders and the

organization itself (see Bowling and Beehr, 2006 for a review). It is therefore not surprising that researchers have been preoccupied with identifying the antecedents of such bullying (e.g. Agervold, 2009; Glasø et al., 2009; Hauge et al., 2007). In this line of enquiry, the main focus has been on two explanatory models involving psychosocial work environment factors and the individual attributes of the targets of bullying (see Hoel and Salin, 2003; Zapf and Einarsen, 2010 for reviews). Despite the progress in understanding the phenomenon, researchers know surprisingly little about leadership and its influence on perceptions of bullying amongst employees. Although there is evidence that bullying is often conducted by a superior (Zapf et al., 2003), relatively little is known about the types of leader attributes that promote bullying behaviour in organizations (Hauge et al., 2007; Hoel et al., 2010 are exceptions in this regard). Previous leadership research has generally focused on leader traits associated with effective leader behaviour (e.g. Yukl, 2006). Although little is still known, in empirical terms, about the effects of bad leadership and its associated attributes (see Tepper, 2007 for a review of the literature on abusive forms of leadership), over the past decade there has been a growing recognition of the need for attention to the “dark sides” of supervisors, that is, traits that are potentially destructive for organizations and that may create strain for subordinates (e.g. Schaubroeck et al., 2007; Tepper, 2000; Tepper et al., 2007). Therefore, the purpose of this study is to advance the understanding of the relationship between supervisor attributes and subordinates' reports of exposure to workplace bullying. There may be at least three types of relationship between supervisor characteristics and supervisor behaviour on the one hand and

subordinates' reports of bullying on the other hand. First, supervisors' behaviour may be construed as bullying by subordinates when leaders exhibit aggressive, hostile or even violent behaviour towards subordinates, or behave by undermining or socially excluding them. Second, by engaging in such behaviour, supervisors may act as role models for subordinates in general, or in relation to a particular employee, who is then systematically victimized by more or less the whole working group. In this way, supervisors may create a culture of fear and misbehaviour in the working environment. Third, supervisors may promote bullying when they tolerate or even reward such behaviour by their subordinates. Supervisors who fail to intervene when confronted by growing frustration and interpersonal conflict amongst team members may indirectly encourage victimization processes within their departments. However, in practice it may be difficult to disentangle these effects, especially since exposure to bullying is considered theoretically as an evolving process, in which an employee is increasingly victimized by exposure to unwanted and hostile behaviours conducted quite often by more than one perpetrator, and by supervisors and colleagues operating in concert (Einarsen and Skogstad, 1996). Thus, this study is a preliminary investigation of the relationships between subordinates' reports of exposure to bullying at work and their supervisors' personality traits. We first investigate these relationships by employing independent data sources for the two conditions, considering personality as reported by the manager, and the subordinates' reports of their exposure to bullying. Based on theory, we assume that supervisor personality, alone or in combination with the supervisors' experienced level of stress (see also Hauge et al., 2007), is a direct or indirect antecedent of bullying within the department. Second, we investigate a possible spillover effect such that supervisors in departments where bullying prevails may be rated less favourably in terms of personality by their subordinates. That is, bullying may act as a negative halo (or "horn") effect for subordinates' ratings of supervisor traits.

Theoretical background

Bullying at work is about victimization processes in supervisor-subordinate relationships or in work

groups where one or more employees are exposed to repeated unwanted actions and practices by others. These actions or practices cause humiliation, offence and distress in the targeted employee, interfering with job performance and/or causing a highly unpleasant working environment (Einarsen and Raknes, 1997). This process may take place deliberately or unconsciously on behalf of the perpetrators, but has as its core the persistent exposure to increasingly harsh, aggressive or undermining behaviours of a primarily psychological nature leading to stigmatization and victimization of the focal person(s) (Björkqvist et al., 1994; Einarsen et al., 2010). As the frequency and duration of the experience are key dimensions of bullying, it is considered to be present when behaviour is directed against a target repeatedly for a long period of time (Björkqvist et al., 1994; Niedl, 1995). Yet, the very nature of the behaviours may be quite diverse, as may be the composition of the perpetrators, because bullying seems to involve both work-related and person-related behaviours, as well as single and multiple perpetrators (Einarsen et al., 2010). Bullying is not an "either-or" phenomenon, but rather a gradually evolving process: "The stigmatising effects of these activities, and their escalating frequency and intensity, make the victim constantly less able to cope with his or her daily tasks and co-operation requirements of the job, thus becoming continually more vulnerable and 'a deserving target'" (Einarsen, 2000, p. 8).

Such bullying may have multiple origins. It may result from the exploitation of power, taking advantage of a power deficit on the part of the target as revenge for perceived unwanted behaviour or characteristics observed in the target, or as a tactic in highly escalated interpersonal conflict (Einarsen et al., 2010). In line with this, this study builds on the following definition (Einarsen et al., 2010, p. 22): "Bullying at work means harassing, offending, socially excluding someone or negatively affecting someone's work tasks. In order for the label bullying (or mobbing) to be applied to a particular activity, interaction or process it has to occur repeatedly and regularly (e.g. weekly) and over a period of time (e.g. about 6 months). Bullying is an escalating process in the course of which the person confronted ends up in an inferior position and becomes the target of systematic negative social acts.

A conflict cannot be called bullying if the incident is an isolated event or if two parties of approximately equal 'strength' are in conflict."

Effects of supervisor personality on organizational bullying

Few studies have investigated the relationship between supervisor traits and subordinates' reports of exposure to bullying, although research has consistently shown strong relationships between bullying and subordinates' perception of the leadership style of their immediate supervisor (Einarsen et al., 1994). For instance, Hoel et al. (2010) showed that subordinates' reports of bullying were related to both an authoritarian and an inconsistent style of leadership, depending on the status of the employees as victims or observers of the bullying. Using a representative sample, Hauge et al. (2007) showed that reports of bullying were strongly related to reporting one's supervisor as portraying both a tyrannical and a laissez-faire leadership style. Regarding personality attributes, Glasø et al. (2009) showed that those who bully others at work describe themselves as portraying elevated levels of interpersonal problems, whilst Matthiesen and Einarsen (2007) showed that bullies tended to be both aggressive and highly stressed.

In general, subordinates frequently interact with their closest supervisors, implying that leadership style may directly influence employees' well-being and health (Glasø and Einarsen, 2006), as well as their productivity (Bass and Riggio, 2006). Supervisors play an important role in how subordinates cope with strain and problems on the job, as well as being a source of strain and problems (Schabracq and Cooper, 1998; Schaubroeck et al., 1993). Studies have shown that employees tend to see their immediate supervisor as one of their greatest sources of stress at work (Hogan et al., 1990). Abusive leader behaviour, that is, "sustained display of hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviours, excluding physical contact" (Tepper, 2000, p. 178), has been associated with lower job and life satisfaction, lower job commitment and justice perceptions, and higher levels of work-family conflict, psychological distress and role conflict in subordinates (Ashforth, 1997; Duffy et al., 2002; Tepper, 2000). Furthermore, abusive leader behaviour has been related to

employee behaviour such as a decrease in organizational citizenship behaviours (Tepper et al., 2004; Zellars et al., 2002) and employee deviance (Mitchell and Ambrose, 2007). Recent studies have indicated that specific personality traits underlie such destructive leadership behaviour. Schaubroeck et al. (2007) found that leader hostility and negative affectivity are related to low levels of well-being and commitment amongst subordinates with low levels of perceived job enrichment. Goldman (2006) conducted two case studies on personality disorders of so-called "toxic" leaders, diagnosing them with either a narcissistic or antisocial personality disorder.

Whilst these studies have provided important knowledge about how abusive leadership may directly influence subordinates' well-being and performance, little is known about how leaders may more indirectly influence claims of bullying and harassment in organizations. Whereas a fair amount of abusive behaviour and bullying seems to be conducted by supervisors, bullying amongst co-workers is also a major problem in many organizations (Zapf et al., 2003). Therefore, our concern in this study is not supervisors' abusive behaviour per se, but rather how supervisors may *affect* claims of bullying in organizations. Supervisors' influence on workplace bullying may also be conceptualized as an emotionally contagious process, whereby supervisors can transmit their feelings and moods to subordinates by expressing their moods in order to influence their subordinates' affect, cognition and behaviour. In support of this mood contagion model, Sy et al. (2005) found that group members experienced a more positive mood, and groups had a more positive affective tone, when leaders were in a positive mood. Moreover, supervisors can also be seen as role models, implying that subordinates will often imitate their supervisors' behaviour, or at least be inspired by how their supervisors conduct themselves. Social cognitive theory and related empirical research suggest that by observing role models, one forms a conception of how new behaviour patterns are performed, and on later occasions this symbolic construction serves as a guide for behaviour (Bandura, 1971, 1986). In this way, relevant supervisor attributes and behaviours may influence organizational bullying, either directly or indirectly. Thus, a supervisor may have a direct influence on workplace bullying when subordinates observe and code their supervisor's behaviour in

terms of cognitive representations that influence future behaviour amongst subordinates, or an indirect influence by a process of negative mood contagion that promotes a negative atmosphere in which bullying is allowed or even encouraged.

In this study, we aim to identify supervisor personality attributes that may influence the levels of bullying behaviour within an organization. As this is a novel area of research, we use the scientifically established and comprehensive Big Five personality model, because it allows us to understand supervisor personality antecedents to bullying at the broadest level using previously validated constructs (Digman, 1990). Furthermore, based on results from a meta-study, Judge et al. (2002) concluded that the Big Five typology is a fruitful basis for studying the personality predictors of leadership. As some of the Big Five personal traits of supervisors may be more related to bullying than others, we assume that four factors, agreeableness, neuroticism, conscientiousness and extroversion, are the most relevant for any association with workplace bullying. Openness is also included in introductory exploratory analyses in this study (without hypotheses).

Low agreeableness is thought to involve a lack of sympathy for other people's distress and a preoccupation with one's own objectives and interests (Digman, 1990). Superiors with low agreeableness may be especially task-oriented and willing to incur high individual costs to achieve the organization's goals. To a greater extent, such supervisors may allow bullying and negative acts, or they may even inflict bullying in order to get the job done (see also Ferris et al., 2007). These supervisors may also create hostile work environments when they are socially distant, unpleasant or intimidating.

Neuroticism involves anxiety, vulnerability, self-consciousness and angry hostility (Costa and McCrae, 1987). Neurotic individuals tend to experience intense anger and "antagonistic hostility, which is characterized by cynicism, callousness, and uncooperativeness" (Costa et al., 1989, p. 48). Neurotics are also constantly vigilant, psychologically and physiologically aroused, and they tend to project their worries onto the work environment. In this way, neurotic supervisors may worry about whether the subordinates do the work they are expected to do. This uneasiness may lead them to use rigorous control, and eventually become hostile

when tasks are not performed to their satisfaction. For instance, when supervisors exhibit negative affect, their subordinates often infer that they have manipulative intentions (Dasborough and Ashkanasy, 2002).

The conscientious person is characterized by dutifulness, self-discipline, order and need for achievement (Digman, 1990). To a considerable extent, such a person will feel responsible for their subordinates. On the other hand, supervisors who display low conscientiousness may show low levels of thoughtfulness and easily overlook, or even disregard, negative behaviour in their organization, whether it is from themselves or others. Thus, low-conscientiousness supervisors may not make it their responsibility to solve conflicts and stop abusive behaviour and, by their inaction, allow bullying to develop amongst subordinates. One may also assume that, by being unreliable and careless, low-conscientiousness supervisors elicit irritation and frustration amongst their subordinates that may eventually produce a negative work environment characterized by aggression and even harassment and bullying. If attributed to hostile intentions, such behaviour may be perceived as harassment. Although intentions are not included in the definition of bullying used in this study, attributions of such intentions may still play an important part in subordinates' perceptions of their leaders' behaviours.

Finally, introverted supervisors may be associated with workplace bullying, because they are quiet, deliberate and reserved, and may be unwilling or unable to communicate effectively with subordinates (see Digman, 1990). A recent study indicated that passive and indirect negative supervisor behaviour in the form of a perceived laissez-faire leadership style, such as not supporting subordinates when they experience difficulties, has negative effects on subordinates. This creates elevated levels of conflict, role conflict and role ambiguity, which results in a greater number of reports of exposure to workplace bullying (Skogstad et al., 2007). Thus, introverted supervisors may not want to intervene when disagreement between subordinates occurs. Such supervisors may not communicate clearly about goals and duties, leaving subordinates in an uncertain situation that may lead eventually to frustration and a hostile work environment. In support of this assumption, Judge et al. (2002) found that extroversion is the most important trait for effective

leadership, suggesting that introverted supervisors are likely to be less effective.

Hypothesis 1: Supervisors' low level of self-reported agreeableness, extroversion and conscientiousness, and high levels of neuroticism are positively related to subordinates' reports of workplace bullying.

The moderating role of supervisors' perceived stress

Situational variables are important for determining how traits influence individual behaviour (Weiss and Adler, 1984). The social interactionist perspective argues that individual factors may be a necessary but insufficient condition for predicting workplace aggression (e.g. Neuman and Baron, 2003). In support of this view, the results from a recent meta-analysis suggest that individual factors such as trait, anger and sex, situational factors such as interpersonal conflict and job dissatisfaction, and situational constraints in the form of workplace stressors that interfere with task performance or goals at work significantly predict workplace aggression (Herscovis et al., 2007). Thus, supervisors' personality attributes may be conceptualized as latent factors that trigger negative behaviour when associated with perceived specific situational stressors. More specifically, we assume that when neurotic, introverted, non-agreeable or low-conscientiousness supervisors perceive stress at work these supervisors may be more likely to transform their frustration into negative behaviour that in turn may trigger a greater amount of negative behaviour amongst subordinates that might escalate into bullying.

Hypothesis 2: A supervisor's perceived stress level moderates the relationship between the supervisor's self-reported personality and subordinates' reports of workplace bullying.

The relationship between reports of exposure to workplace bullying and subordinates' perceptions of supervisor personality – a negative halo (horn) effect?

The relationship between supervisors' attributes and workplace bullying may also be explained in terms of

attribution theory. The "romance of leadership" theory asserts that subordinates tend to overattribute positive or negative outcomes to leaders (Meindl et al., 1985). According to Meindl (1995, pp. 330–331), "followers react to, and are more influenced by, their constructions of their leader's personality than they are by the 'true' personality of the leader...it is the personalities of leaders as imagined or constructed by followers that become the object of study, not 'actual' or 'clinical' personality *per se*." Thus, the romance of leadership perspective provides an alternative explanation to the classical "great man" theory, which suggests that the leader causes organizational outcomes, be they good or bad.

In support of this view, Bligh et al. (2007) found that perceptions of aversive leadership were more strongly related to follower-rated outcomes of job satisfaction and resistance than to the leader-rated variables of follower complaining, organizational citizenship behaviours and performance, indicating that the follower-ratings were more the result of an attributed negative halo effect. Thus, when bullying prevails, it is likely that the reasons for these outcomes may be attributed to the supervisor. A negative halo effect (or "horn" effect) may occur when negative arousal originating from the presence of bullying is misattributed to negative supervisor attributes. According to a self-serving bias perspective, when a person observes bullying or is a target of bullying, it is more convenient to blame the supervisor than, for instance, to search for explanations in oneself, the situation or co-workers.

Hypothesis 3: Subordinates who report bullying behaviour in their organization perceive their supervisor as being non-agreeable, introverted, neurotic and low in conscientiousness.

Method

Subjects

Data were obtained from questionnaires completed by 207 employees and supervisors in 70 Norwegian restaurants (see also Mathisen et al., 2008). Norwegian restaurants are generally small, and might be considered as proximal teams with close collaboration

between supervisors and subordinates. The number of respondents in each restaurant ranged from 1 to 11, with an average of three respondents per restaurant. The mean age was 26, and the sample included 83 females and 124 males; 32% were apprentices, 35% were cooks or waiters and 33% were supervisors. The majority of supervisors participating in the study were chefs (24% of the 207 participants). Of the remaining supervisors, 4% were general restaurant managers and 5% were food and beverage managers.

Procedure

Before data collection, the study was registered in the Norwegian social science data service. The collection of data was administered by regional representatives of the Norwegian Association for Training in the Hotel and Food Industry (NATF) in seven counties, who visited restaurants to deliver questionnaires, and then returned after approximately 1 week to collect the questionnaires. All participants gave their informed consent prior to their inclusion in the study. The data collectors were instructed to ask the restaurants for responses from at least one supervisor (preferably the chef), apprentices and cooks. The response rate for restaurants in each of the seven counties varied from 43% to 55%, with a mean of 49%, close to the mean response rate found in such surveys (Baruch and Holtom, 2008). The regional representatives of the NATF were requested to collect at least three questionnaires from each restaurant, which was achieved in 39 of the 70 restaurants (55.7%).

Measures

Exposure to bullying behaviour was measured by the Negative Act Questionnaire (NAQ) (Einarsen and Raknes, 1997; Einarsen et al., 2009; Hoel et al., 2001), which consists of 27 items that measure exposure to specific negative acts typical of bullying. The items refer to both direct (e.g. ridicule, offensive remarks) and indirect (e.g. slander, social ostracism) behaviour, but do not require respondents to self-label as a victim of bullying. Examples of

items are: “Persistent criticism of your work and effort”, “Insulting messages, telephone calls, or emails” and “Having allegations made against you”. Respondents indicated on a five-point scale (1 = never, 2 = now and then, 3 = monthly, 4 = weekly and 5 = daily) whether they experienced the negative acts in their job. Cronbach’s α in the present sample was 0.91.

Witnessing bullying was measured by the item: “Have you observed bullying taking place at your workplace during the last six months?” from QPS-Nordic (Dallner et al., 2000); the response alternatives were “no, never”, “yes, but seldom”, “now and then” and “often”.

Personality was measured by the short version of the 5PFa, a Norwegian Big Five inventory (Engvik, 1993, 1994). This version consists of 20 items, with four items measuring each of the “big five” personality factors: “extroversion”, “neuroticism”, “conscientiousness”, “openness” and “agreeableness”. The 5PFa is organized as a semantic differential with seven response options for each item. Examples of items measuring the five personality factors are: extroversion, “talkative...quiet”; neuroticism, “tense...not tense”; conscientiousness, “structured...not structured”; openness, “inventive...not inventive” and agreeableness, “caring...not caring”. The supervisors rated their own personality, and the subordinates rated the personality of their supervisor. Cronbach’s α s for the supervisors’ self-ratings of personality were: neuroticism, 0.77; conscientiousness, 0.79; agreeableness, 0.79; extroversion, 0.73 and openness, 0.77. Cronbach’s α s for subordinates’ ratings of their supervisor’s personality used in the study were: agreeableness, 0.70; neuroticism, 0.72; conscientiousness, 0.82; extroversion (one item, “dominating...not dominating”, was removed because of its low item-to-scale correlation, 0.56 (the α was 0.44 before the item was deleted) and openness, 0.77.

Job stress was assessed using Cooper’s Job Stress Scale (Cooper, 1981), which consists of 22 descriptions of situations that are common stress factors, each rated on a six-point scale with response alternatives ranging from “no stress at all” (0) to “a great deal of stress” (5). Examples of items are “relationship with employees”, “lack of influence and power” and “making mistakes”. Two of the items, “the amount of required travelling” and “to be moved to another workplace”, were marginally relevant in the

context of this study and were not included in the data analyses. For the purpose of this study, a summed scale of the 20 items, which had a Cronbach's α of 0.91, was used.

Data analysis

To test relationships between supervisors' self-ratings of personality and workplace bullying, the dataset was aggregated at the restaurant level by calculating mean scores for respondents at each restaurant (i.e. the additive composition model, Chan, 1998). Only restaurants with three or more respondents were included in the analysis of the aggregated data ($N = 39$). For the majority of restaurants, only one supervisor responded to the survey, and the responses from these respondents constituted the supervisor personality and stress variables. However, for four of the restaurants, more than one supervisor responded. Since the majority of supervisors representing the restaurants were chefs, we selected the chef as the one who provided the supervisor personality and stress variables in these four restaurants.

The interrater agreement of supervisor personality and bullying within each restaurant was calculated using James et al.'s (1993) formula, $r_{wg(j)}$. The $r_{wg(j)}$ values were: introversion, 0.91; conscientiousness, 0.81; neuroticism, 0.71; openness, 0.73 and agreeableness, 0.59, the last one being below the 0.70 level that Nunnally (1978) recommended as a good level for internal consistency. The $r_{wg(j)}$ values for the bullying variables were 0.95 for exposure to

bullying (NAQ) and 0.92 for witnessing bullying, indicating high levels of agreement.

To test the relationship between subordinates' perception of supervisor personality and workplace bullying (Hypothesis 3), the analyses were calculated at the individual level.

Results

Correlations between supervisors' self-reported personality, supervisors' perceived stress levels and aggregated levels of workplace bullying are presented in Table I (Hypothesis 1). Conscientiousness was the only personality variable that correlated significantly with bullying, whereas supervisors' perceived stress was strongly correlated with subordinates' reports of bullying in the workplace using NAQ scores. This indicated that in restaurants where the supervisors had high levels of perceived stress, a greater number of negative acts prevailed in their organization. Results from multiple regressions, reported in Table II, showed that supervisors' self-reported neuroticism, conscientiousness and stress were significantly related to the presence of bullying in the workplace. Thus, in cases where supervisors are neurotic and low on conscientiousness, bullying is more prevalent. On the other hand, none of the supervisors' self-reported personality variables significantly predicted the NAQ scores. Thus, Hypothesis 1 was only partially supported.

The results from multiple regression analyses that calculated the moderating effect of supervisor stress

TABLE I
Relationships between leader self-ratings of personality, leader self-reported stress and workplace bullying

Variable	Mean	SD	N	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Supervisor self-reported neuroticism	4.51	1.1	25	—						
2. Supervisor self-reported agreeableness	5.56	1.1	25	-0.38	—					
3. Supervisor self-reported extroversion	4.2	0.94	25	-0.54**	0.60*	—				
4. Supervisor self-reported conscientiousness	5.54	1.19	25	-0.10	-0.21	0.26	—			
5. Supervisor self-reported openness	5.17	1.04	25	-0.07	-0.24	0.45*	0.55**	—		
6. Supervisor self-reported stress	1.79	0.95	26	-0.53**	0.00	0.10	0.08	0.02	—	
7. NAQ	1.25	0.18	39	0.27	-0.02	0.07	-0.07	0.01	0.41*	—
8. Witnessing bullying	1.5	0.48	39	0.06	-0.01	0.00	-0.45*	-0.19	0.25	0.66**

$N = 26$. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$.

TABLE II
Multiple regression results for supervisors' self-reported personality and workplace bullying

Dependent variable	Independent variables	β	F	R^2
NAQ	Supervisor self-reported stress	0.27*	1.8	0.07
	Supervisor self-reported neuroticism	0.05		
	Supervisor self-reported agreeableness	0.04		
	Supervisor self-reported extroversion	-0.08		
	Supervisor self-reported conscientiousness	0.04		
	Full model			
Witnessing bullying	Supervisor self-reported stress	0.33**	4.4**	0.15
	Supervisor self-reported neuroticism			
	Supervisor self-reported agreeableness	0.27*		
	Supervisor self-reported extroversion	-0.08		
	Supervisor self-reported conscientiousness	-0.15		
	Full model	0.32**		

$N = 26$. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$.

on the relationship between supervisors' self-reported personality and workplace bullying are reported in Table III. A main effect of stress was revealed. In accordance with Hypothesis 2, a significant interaction was then found between supervisors' low agreeableness and perceived stress as predictors of bullying behaviour (NAQ) in the restaurant ($p < 0.05$). The same variables were almost significantly related to the variable "witnessing bullying" ($p < 0.10$). Figure 1 illustrates this relationship, showing that supervisors' self-reported low agreeableness is more strongly related to bullying in the workplace when the supervisors also experience low levels of stress. Hence, a relationship exists between agreeableness and bullying when leaders are not under stress. When leaders are under high stress, personality does not seem to matter. No significant interaction effects were found for any of the supervisors' other self-rated personality variables and the supervisors' perceived stress.

In order to test the romance of leadership hypothesis (Hypothesis 3), which predicts a negative halo effect after experiencing bullying, resulting in negative perceptions of supervisor personality, a correlation analysis was performed for the variables workplace bullying and subordinates' perception of their supervisor's personality (Table IV). Significant correlations in the expected directions were found between all personality variables and witnessing bullying. Furthermore, significant negative correla-

tions were found between a subordinate's perception of supervisor agreeableness and conscientiousness and their reports of workplace bullying (NAQ). Results from the multiple regression analysis (Table V) showed that the subordinate's reports of supervisor agreeableness and extroversion were significantly related to witnessing bullying. Thus, subordinates who observe bullying in their workplace tend to perceive their supervisor as cold, cynical and introverted. Nevertheless, only one of the subordinate-reported supervisor personality variables (agreeableness) was significantly related to NAQ, meaning that Hypothesis 3 was only partially supported.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to address the role of supervisor personality and supervisor-experienced stress in reports of workplace bullying and harassment. Our first hypothesis, that there is a direct relationship between supervisors' self-reported low levels of agreeableness, extroversion, and conscientiousness, and high levels of neuroticism, respectively, and subordinates' reports of workplace bullying, received partial support. The results showed that amongst the supervisor self-ratings of personality variables, conscientiousness and neuroticism were significantly related to bullying. Thus, sloppy and careless as well as anxious and vulnerable supervisors seem to bring on

TABLE III

The moderating effect of supervisor stress on the relationship between supervisor self-ratings of personality and workplace bullying

Variable	NAQ		Witnessing bullying	
	Step 1	Step 2	Step 1	Step 2
Supervisor low agreeableness	-0.23	-0.30	0.22	0.28
Supervisor stress	0.42*	0.52**	0.27	0.36 [†]
Supervisor low agreeableness × supervisor stress		0.35*		0.34 [†]
R^2	0.21	0.33	0.11	0.22
F	3.68*	4.23**	1.62	2.37 [†]
Supervisor neuroticism	-0.12	-0.11	0.14	0.15
Supervisor stress	0.46*	0.47*	0.31	0.27
Supervisor neuroticism × supervisor stress		0.08		0.19
R^2	0.17	0.18	0.07	0.11
F	2.76 [†]	1.85	1.08	1.06
Supervisor introversion	0.08	0.04	0.01	0.05
Supervisor stress	0.38	0.41	0.24	0.21
Supervisor introversion × supervisor stress		0.10		0.12
R^2	0.17	0.17	0.06	0.07
F	2.67	1.83	0.84	0.68
Supervisor conscientiousness	0.10	0.13	0.09	0.12
Supervisor stress	0.41*	0.46*	0.25	0.30
Supervisor conscientiousness × supervisor stress		0.26		0.25
R^2	0.17	0.23	0.07	0.13
F	2.83	2.74	0.99	1.29

Multiple regression analysis.

[†] $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$.

Note. Standardized β coefficients are reported.

negative behaviour and aggression in the workplace. These findings may be explained in several ways. Supervisors who are low in conscientiousness may oversee conflicts and negative behaviours, or they may observe such behaviours but avoid intervening between the parties involved. Furthermore, the neurotic supervisor may not have the courage needed to intervene in conflicts. From a modelling perspective, both the low-conscientiousness and the neurotic supervisor may model behaviours and attitudes characterized by low commitment, whereby no one takes responsibility for stopping negative or abusive behaviour. The low-conscientiousness supervisor may also irritate and frustrate subordinates by being unpredictable and sloppy. Eventually, these feelings may develop into aggression and even harassment, leading to the bullying of easy targets for such

aggression. Neurotic supervisors' insecurity and uneasiness may also lead them to show negative behaviour such as rigorous control and hostility when tasks are solved in unsatisfactory ways. Thus, neurotic leaders may themselves act as perpetrators.

However, as only two of the four predicted supervisors' self-rating personality variables showed statistically significant relationships with bullying, and the total regression models explained a low percentage of the total variance, our findings suggest that supervisor personality in general does not seem to be a strong predictor of workplace bullying. One reason for the lack of significant relationships may be that personality is only one of many factors that influence the occurrence of bullying and harassment in workplaces, such as the physical and psychosocial work environments, stress, job satisfaction, unclear

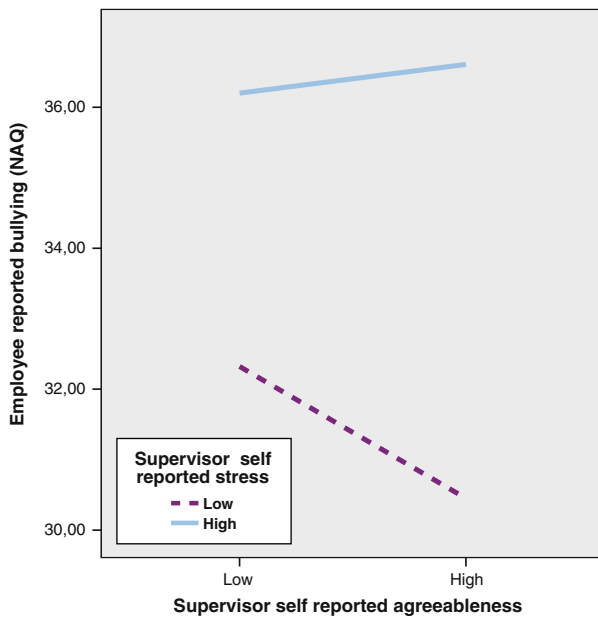


Figure 1. The interaction between supervisor self-reported agreeableness and supervisor self-reported stress on employee-reported bullying in the restaurants.

roles, and target idiosyncrasies (see Hoel and Salin, 2003). These factors may also act as moderators or mediators between supervisor personality and workplace bullying. Consequently, only moderate associations at best might be expected between supervisor personality and organizational bullying. However, it is worth mentioning that this study, which employed the five-factor framework, mainly

addressed what Hogan has claimed to be the “bright side” of a manager’s personality (Hogan, 1994; Hogan et al., 1990). Hence, investigating the “dark side” of personality (e.g. psychoticism, trait hostility, etc.) may have yielded different results, and should therefore be addressed in future studies.

The next step in our study was to examine the effect of stress as a possible moderating variable when cold, neurotic, low-conscientiousness or introverted supervisors who experience high levels of stress promote bullying and harassment in their organization. In addressing this issue, the hypothesis was that the supervisors’ perceived stress level moderates the relationship between supervisor self-reported personality and subordinates’ reports of workplace bullying. Thus, in Hypothesis 2, we considered stress to be a trigger of workplace bullying when combined with undesirable supervisor personality traits. In general, our findings showed that supervisor stress correlated more strongly with workplace bullying than did supervisor personality. One explanation of this finding may be that, in a causal sequence, perceived stress is probably closer to bullying behaviour than is personality, and is therefore more likely to be a direct predictor of bullying, whilst personality may produce bullying behaviour only in combination with other factors, such as stress. When the results were examined more closely, an actual link between agreeableness and subordinates’ reports of exposure to bullying was revealed, but only when the leader had experienced a low level of stress. This result

TABLE IV
Correlations between subordinates’ perception of their supervisor’s personality and workplace bullying

Variable	Mean	SD	N	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Subordinate report of supervisor neuroticism	4.88	1.45	167	–					
2. Subordinate report of supervisor agreeableness	5.04	1.08	169	–0.39**	–				
3. Subordinate report of supervisor extroversion	5.08	1.07	168	–0.23**	0.52**	–			
4. Subordinate report of supervisor conscientiousness	5.11	1.40	166	–0.39**	0.48**	0.37**	–		
5. Subordinate report of supervisor openness	4.92	1.32	169	–0.30	0.40**	0.41**	0.56**	–	
6. NAQ	1.28	0.36	198	0.03	–0.30**	–0.15	–0.19*	–0.07	–
7. Witnessing bullying	1.57	0.77	204	0.16*	–0.29**	–0.28**	–0.16*	–0.07	0.41**

N = 26. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$.

TABLE V
Multiple regression results for subordinates' perception of their supervisor's personality and workplace bullying

Dependent variable	Independent variable	β	F	R^2
NAQ	Subordinate report of supervisor neuroticism	0.10		
	Subordinate report of supervisor agreeableness	-0.37**		
	Subordinate report of supervisor extroversion	0.05		
	Subordinate report of supervisor conscientiousness	-0.06		
	Full model		5.2**	0.12
Witnessing bullying	Subordinate report of supervisor neuroticism	-0.06		
	Subordinate report of supervisor agreeableness	-0.20*		
	Subordinate report of supervisor extroversion	-0.17*		
	Subordinate report of supervisor conscientiousness	0.02		
	Full model		5.3**	0.12

$N = 26$. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$.

indicates that most leaders who are under high pressure may show and promote more bullying, whilst under conditions of low stress, bullying will only be activated when the supervisor has a cold, cynical, inconsiderate and unfriendly personality. This finding may be explained in at least two ways. First, a low-agreeableness supervisor may promote general bullying, with the supervisor acting as a perpetrator. A low-agreeableness person tends in general to be abrasive. Second, low-agreeableness supervisors may act as social models for the promotion of bullying behaviour by others in the organization (see Bandura, 1986). Thus, by behaving in an unfriendly and inconsiderate manner, the supervisor sets an example for employee behaviour. In this way, a supervisor may promote a "climate for bullying" that in turn may encourage bullying behaviour in employees. However, low-agreeable leaders do not behave in this way more frequently than other people who are under high levels of stress, as stress may be the main predictor of bullying. We did not find statistically significant interactions between stress and any of the other supervisors' self-rated personality variables with respect to reports of bullying.

To conclude, we found only partial support for our hypotheses concerning the relationships between supervisors' self-ratings of personality and workplace bullying. This finding may be explained to some extent by our selection of the big five personality variables that are broad and general, and do not emphasize specific negative or hostile

supervisor traits. Therefore, the next phase of this research will involve a more direct examination of narrower and more pathological leader personality variables that are more directly linked to negative behaviour, such as negative affectivity, hostility (see Schaubroeck et al., 2007) and narcissistic and borderline symptoms (Hogan, 1994). Furthermore, caution should be exercised in the interpretation of the results from this study. As the data were cross-sectional, strictly speaking, we cannot draw conclusions about causal relationships. Whilst this study has shown that, to some extent, there is a relationship between supervisor personality, stress and organizational bullying, one could also argue that bad organizations will have more negative behaviours amongst employees and employ more inefficient leaders. A reciprocal relationship between the variables may also exist, since bad leaders might influence the level of bullying in the restaurants, which in turn leads to rumours about the restaurant, so that the restaurant is then unable to hire good leaders. Longitudinal studies should be conducted to obtain more information about causal relationships.

Our third hypothesis proposed that subordinates who observe or experience bullying behaviour in their organization perceive their supervisor as being non-agreeable, introverted, neurotic and low on conscientiousness (the negative halo effect). In support of this hypothesis regarding the negative halo effect or "horn effect", several correlations between bullying and subordinates' perceptions of their supervisor were statistically significant. The results

from multiple regression analyses showed that subordinates' ratings of supervisors as non-agreeable and introverted were most strongly related to their observation of bullying. Thus, different supervisor personality variables were related to witnessing bullying at work when supervisors reported their own personality (neuroticism and conscientiousness) as opposed to when subordinates reported their supervisors' low agreeableness and low extroversion. Moreover, an interesting finding in the context of this study was the moderate to low correlations between supervisors' self-rated personality and the subordinates' ratings of their supervisors' personality (agreeableness, 0.00; extroversion, 0.27; conscientiousness, 0.16; neuroticism, 0.22 and openness, 0.08). Thus, subordinates perceived their supervisor's personality differently from the supervisors' perception of their own personality. These findings may be interpreted as supporting our expectation that subordinates' perception of their supervisors' personality is influenced by their general work situation. This finding emphasizes the importance of exercising caution when drawing conclusions about causality in cross-sectional same-source survey studies (see Podsakoff et al., 2003). The relationships may equally well reflect attribution effects, negative halo effects and no real causal effects. However, most previous studies of workplace bullying have been survey studies in which the same source has reported both the independent and dependent variables, providing no information about cause and effect. Furthermore, most information on perpetrator characteristics, as well as leader characteristics in bullying cases, has been based on targets' reports. Obviously, these reports may overestimate the negative characteristics of perpetrators and leaders.

A limitation of this study is that our data were collected in the restaurant sector, which is generally regarded as a highly demanding workplace with a high level of authoritarian leadership (e.g. Lucas, 2002; Price, 1994). Owing to their powerful positions, restaurant supervisors may play a more central role in the development of harassment and bullying in their organizations than is the case for supervisors in other organizations, such as universities, where leaders and subordinates have more equal status. Future studies, therefore, need to compare the effect of leader personality on workplace bullying across different types of organizations. With this possible limitation in

mind, the study also has an important methodological strength through its use of both subordinates' ratings of their supervisors' personality and supervisors' own ratings of their personality. Hence to some extent, common method variance was ruled out as a possible problem in the interpretation of the observed relationships between supervisor personality and the occurrence of bullying in the organizations.

Conclusion

This study directs attention to a missing link in bullying research. Although a few studies have examined the relationship between a leader's personality and abusive behaviour (Goldman, 2006; Schaubroeck et al., 2007), the relationship between supervisor personality and reports of workplace bullying has not been previously reported.

We found that supervisors' self-reported low conscientiousness and neuroticism, as well as agreeableness under low levels of stress, were significantly associated with subordinates' reports of exposure to workplace bullying, indicating that to some extent supervisor personality predicts bullying behaviour at work. However, our finding that supervisor stress was more strongly related to workplace bullying than was supervisor personality may have important practical implications for the prevention of bullying. For instance, leadership training should focus on reducing stressors, promoting an understanding of how stress may lead to negative behaviour at work and providing guidance on how to manage stress reactions.

Finally, an important finding from this study is the documented relationship between workplace bullying and subordinates' perceptions of their supervisor's personality. An important implication from this finding is the need to be aware of scapegoat processes, in which the leaders become the scapegoat when bullying or negative acts are prevalent at work. Such situations may have severe negative effects on the leaders' well-being, and may escalate conflicts. A more general implication is that perceptions are influenced by emotions, and they need not be the "objective truth", a reminder that applies in particular to bullying and harassment situations that are accompanied by strong emotions. A practical implication for any intervention might involve an investigation of the development of such negative

attribution processes amongst subordinates. Information about subordinates' trust in their leader provides useful knowledge for planning any future intervention process.

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